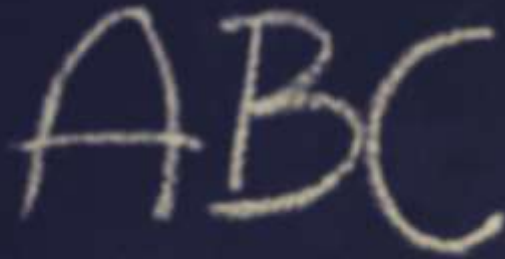


THE DEVOTED PARENT'S GUIDE TO VERBAL AUTISM

HOW TO MAKE SCHOOL A SNAP! (and LESS STRESSFUL)



ABC



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Hello, Mom or Dad!

You know your child with special needs or autism better than anyone, and you want to help her or him to communicate to the best of her or his abilities. Being a parent makes you the most important person for your child!

But where's the help for YOU to understand and empower your child? You've come to the right place.

As an ASHA-certified speech-language pathologist, I've been working with people with autism and special needs for over 20 years. I strive to achieve more, just like you

do, every day. Together, through my articles, videos, and apps, we can significantly help your child in the convenience of your own home.

In this e-book, you'll learn new and effective ways to improve your child's communication abilities in several key areas: academic learning, physical activities, socializing with other students, and conversation with you at the end of each school day. My goal is for you and teachers to empower your special needs child with more confidence and success during the school year than ever before!

After you've tried a few of my techniques, feel free to email your questions, comments, or concerns to me at karen@icanforautism.com.

☺ *Karen*

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A+ Tips to Make School Language Understandable for Students with Autism



Imagine that you have been suddenly transported into a classroom in China with absolutely no knowledge of Chinese. You don't understand the language, so you can't understand the concept of what is being taught.

This same type of language impairment sometimes exists for children with autism in their own school, despite the teacher and student speaking a common language. This is because 'academic language' often uses abstract thought which isn't always easy for children with autism.

To help kids overcome these language challenges, parents and educators can make words more practical and understandable through (A) 'brain-based' teaching methods, which are based on the latest scientific research about how the brain learns and develops, and (B) 'metalinguistic awareness', which is actively thinking about how language is used. Here are a few techniques.

READING COMPREHENSION

The enjoyment of reading stories comes with a rich connection to the characters and events. Children with autism can find it tough to follow the author's interjections of nonliteral concepts into the text. For example, while reading the book, *Destiny's Gift* (Natasha Tarpley, 2004) together with my client, we came across this sentence: "Destiny gobbled up the words like candy." My client knew that this statement was a 'figure of speech' or an 'expression,' but he couldn't interpret what it meant.

I started to explain how people who are really hungry 'gobble' their food, but this steered my student in the wrong direction. Thinking that this had something to do with the mouth, he thought the character was reading the written words from the book aloud (with her mouth).

Realizing the need to be more exact, I made this analogy:

"Just like we 'gobble up' tasty food in 'gobs', or large amounts, quickly because we love to eat tasty things, Destiny 'gobbles up' the written words with her eyes and her brain because she loves to read wonderful words. For Destiny, 'words' are like 'yummy candy' so of course she wants to keep reading many books the way we would want to keep eating lots of candy."

Next, we acted out the body language of what it would look like when people gobble up candy without a care of what's going on around them. Finally, we acted out what Destiny would look like while reading intensely. My client so gratefully said, "Oh, wow! This is fun! I didn't know all that!"

SOCIAL STUDIES

Sometimes, language used within textbooks may prevent some kids with autism from understanding the concepts behind the written words.

For example, a social studies textbook stated something like, “There were concrete ties between the political parties.” After I took a lot of time to discuss the multiple meanings of “concrete”, “ties”, and “parties”, it was clear that my client still misunderstood when she said, “People like the president can wear nice, heavy ties because it’s a party.” I realized that because I had given her information about the words in pieces, this child was unable to form a whole concept.

To overcome this, I knew I had to paraphrase the difficult language for her: “These groups of people are in the government, and they work hard together.” Then, she put those words into her own words so that it became her own. Above all, it’s important to translate this academic language into more familiar words like:

Parties = Groups of people, like when the restaurant hostess calls “Party of four” to tell you that your family’s table, who has a total of four people, is ready

Concrete = Cement to make something, like bricks or ideas or relationships, stick together very well

Ties = Like each shoe lace combines to form a knot, both groups of people (‘parties’) combine their work activity together.

VOCABULARY

Making associations, your child can recall other instances where he has heard or seen the root or variations of the word, including familiar foreign languages.

For example:

AQUATIC can be related to ‘aquarium’, the color aqua, and the word ‘agua’ in Spanish - which all are related to ‘water’.

CRESCENT, like the shape of a moon, can be related to the ‘croissant’ pastry (which means ‘crescent-shaped’ in French).

COMPUTER is something that ‘computes’ or ‘thinks about information’. Likewise, a

PRINTER is the machine that 'prints'. Further point out that your child 'prints' for HANDWRITING, which is 'writing' by 'hand' versus by machine.

A LINK to a website works like 'links' on a chain in that it 'connects' or 'links' you to the Internet.

CLOTHES come from 'cloth'; we can clean ourselves with a 'wash cloth' or put a pretty, protective 'tablecloth' on the table.

GEOGRAPHY



Some children with autism are very detail-oriented and have excellent map skills. However, some will tell you that the 'city' they live in is "Nevada" or "The United States."

You can make it easier to understand word relations of space and location through visual organization by designing your own 'map' on a sheet of paper. First, draw a huge circle, and label it "World." Then, using continually smaller

circles inside one another, write “Continent: North America”, then “Country: United States of America”, then “State: California”, then “City: Los Angeles”, and finally within the tiniest circle, “Address: 400 Hollywood Boulevard”.

SCIENCE

Help your child identify the unique characteristics of familiar items. Using ‘states of matter’ (solid/liquid/gas) as an example, you can teach your child using everyday ‘shapes’ or ‘forms’ of matter (or “stuff”) like foods and drinks. Explain how the characteristics of a ‘solid’ can feel ‘hard’ like an apple or ‘soft’ like butter and has a ‘shape’ like a ball or cube, respectively. A ‘liquid’ is like something ‘wet’ we ‘drink’, while a ‘gas’ is like steam from a teapot or smoke from cooking.

Bridge previous experience with newly learned concepts:

A potato can take different forms as a solid (like mashed potatoes, French fries, or potato chips), but it can’t be changed into a liquid or gas.

Some solid fruit like apples can become liquid in the form of apple juice; however, a banana can only be a solid.

Ice cream or butter are usually experienced solid, but easily melt into a liquid.

Interestingly, when either tea (a liquid) or steak (a solid) are heated, they both give off gases of steam and smoke, respectively.

Design a chart to visualize and organize information with columns labeled ‘Solid / Liquid / Gas’ and rows containing various foods. Have your child make corresponding checkmarks and X’s in the columns into which each food can and cannot transform. For example, butter would have a checkmark in the columns for Solid and Liquid, but an X for Gas.

WRITING

Writing is probably one of the most difficult tasks for a student with autism because it requires multiple forms of language like thoughts, opinions, explanations, and so on.

My client's homework assignment required her to describe how she felt the first time she saw or did something new. She wrote, "I learned how to ride a bike when I was little. I can ride a bike now." Unable to recall with words her feelings/thoughts/observations from years past, I had to elicit an immediate, novel, interesting experience for inspiration.

Using a real peacock feather that she had never before seen, she wrote all of her observations:

"This feather has beautiful colors."

"I wonder how this long feather fit into the peacock's tail."

"It's tickly."

"Did they make pens with this?"

"Where did you get this from?"

Then, it was easier to form these thoughts into a flowing paragraph:

"I saw a peacock on TV, but I never touched one. I didn't know that some stores can sell these feathers. The feather is so long, and it has beautiful colors, and it's tickly. I saw online that they used peacock feathers to make pens a long time ago..."

MATH

Word problems are usually problematic. Mixing language - already an area of deficit - with mathematical computations creates a challenging situation. It's best to first help your child figure out what the situation is. An effective way to do this is through sketching. Once the concept of the word problem is drawn, you can then discuss the calculations.

Let's say the scenario is: "Stacy worked 3 days a week, earning \$10 per day for a month. How much money did she earn in total?"

Step 1: Sketch a simple calendar with 7 columns (days) and 4 rows (explaining that 4 weeks usually equals a month). On varying days each week, mark three of them with "\$10".

Step 2: Explain that "total" means "adding all" of her "earnings" ("the money she made from working"). Your child will add \$10 a total of 12 times, or \$120.

LET CLASS BEGIN!

Since no one teaching method is best, try different ways to actively engage your child to better understand academic language. When language is interesting and makes sense, your child takes ownership of it. Then, the content of what is being learned becomes more meaningful and practical. As a result, your child will feel more confident with language and more successful in school.❖

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Initiating Conversations About the School Day



Of course, as parents, you want to bond emotionally with your child and have conversations especially about new and exciting events going on in school, so you tend to request information by asking your child questions like:

What did you do at school today?

What's new today?

How was school today?

Who's your new teacher?

What's your favorite subject?

And so on.

For a child with autism, this is more like a quiz, especially since the responses to these types of questions range from very general and broad (which can be overwhelming and frustrating) or very specific one-word answers (which prevent the conversation from going forward).

Since the purpose is to connect emotionally – and not to necessarily gain information – let's discuss better ways to have conversations to reach your child.

After each step that we will explore, pause a moment to give your child an opportunity to keep the conversation going. If he or she needs more help, continue onto the next step.

There are lots of different ways to communicate and many more parts of conversation to consider. These steps are just some suggestions for you to use as a guide.

Here is a scenario for a child with limited language skills:

Step 1. Introduce the topic of conversation

The evening before a school day introduce something like, "Hmm...I wonder what your school lunch is going to be tomorrow."

Step 2. Use a physical object to look at or touch as a reference

Say something like, "Let's look at your school lunch schedule," and show your child the schedule.

Step 3. Guide your child through a fill-in-the blank

Say something like, "Ah, tomorrow's school lunch is going to be ----."

Step 4. Provide a model for your child

"Ah, tomorrow's school lunch is going to be pizza."

Step 5. Direct your child to retell

"I know that pizza is your favorite food! Tell me how much you love pizza—you say, 'Mmmm I love pizza!'"

Here is a scenario for a child with intermediate language skills:

Step 1. Introduce the topic of conversation

Unpack your child's backpack together with him or her. You can introduce something like, "I see that you've brought home science homework about photosynthesis."

Step 2. Use a physical object to look at or touch as a reference

Together with your child, look at the homework diagram of photosynthesis. Say something like, "Hmm...I wonder what happens when the rays of the sun touch the plant..."

Step 3. Guide your child through a fill-in-the blank

Say something like, "It looks like the rays of the sun are touching the plant so the plant -----."

Step 4. Provide a model for your child

"It looks like the rays of the sun are touching the plant so the plant can make its own food. Wow! That's so cool."

Step 5. Direct your child to retell

"I think Dad would like you to tell him how during photosynthesis the rays of the sun touch the plant so that the plant can make its own food"

Here is a scenario for a child with advanced language skills:

Step 1. Introduce the topic of conversation

While reading your child's teacher-parent home journal, you see that the teacher has written about an incident where your child had a tantrum because

he didn't win a boardgame that he was playing with his classmate, Justin. Say something like, "Mrs. Smith wrote me a note about what happened at school today with your friend, Justin."

Step 2. Use a physical object to look at or touch as a reference

Point to the words in the notebook and say something like, "You see here—Mrs. Smith wrote something about how you "threw the boardgame on the ground."

Step 3. Guide your child through a fill-in-the blank

Say something like, "You threw the boardgame on the ground because---."

Step 4. Provide a model for your child

"I think you threw the boardgame on the ground because you were upset that you lost and Justin won."

Step 5. Direct your child to retell

"Tell me more about how you were feeling when Justin won the game and what you did."

Notice how making statements instead of asking questions can often be more productive for interactive conversation! ❖

Cafeteria Conversations

The whole school day long, teachers are reminding kids not to talk during lessons. Ready to burst, kids can't wait until lunchtime to start gabbing.

But, kids with autism are usually left out of these conversations. In part, this is because they're not sure how to begin or join in on a conversation.



Lunchtime in the cafeteria is the perfect place and time for your kids to chat with their friends and build stronger friendships. There are many ways to have a conversation and many aspects of conversation to consider.

Use these suggestions as a guide to explain and practice at home with your child by setting up the following scenarios:

Explain to you child how to begin a conversation.

Step 1: Tell your child, “Choose to speak with a friend who is near you like on your left or right side or across from you.”

Step 2: Tell her, “Choose a topic to talk about like” **your immediate surroundings, such as the food**

Step 3: Think about what you'd like to do such as offering, sharing, or trading some of your food with your friend.

Step 4: Find the words to start the conversation like:

“Alexis, I know you like grapes. My mom gave me lots of grapes. Would you like some?”

Or, “Oh, man. Another cheese stick?! Hey, Dylan—Can I trade you my cheese stick for your apple?”

Explore other topics which can include recent school events, like what happened immediately beforehand

- 1) Think about what you'd like to do, such as complaining, or talking about your feelings with your friend.
- 2) Find the words to start the conversation, like: “Can you believe that kid cut the lunch line?”
Or, “I think that math test we just took was so hard. How do you think you did on it?”

Another topic can be future school events

- 1) Think about what you'd like to do, such as anticipate, or hope.
- 2) Find the words to start the conversation like: “I can't wait for the music assembly. I hope they sing my favorite song.”
Or, “I'm so excited about our field trip to the farm next week. I wonder if there are going to be baby pigs.”

Other topics can be of a general nature

- 1) Think about what you'd like to do such as tell about an event or express emotion.
- 2) Find the words to start the conversation like: "This weekend I saw the movie XYZ. It was awesome! Did you see it, Peter?"
Or, "My team lost another game yesterday. I'm so upset."

Notice that starting a conversation doesn't always have to be asking the person a question. Continue to practice by thinking of different things your child can do with his chosen topic of conversation and then chose different ways he can say it.

If a conversation has already begun, explain to you child how to join in.

Step 1: Tell your child, "Choose to speak with a friend who is near you like on your left or right side or across from you."

Step 2: Tell him, "Join in, or continue talking, about topics that you like":

Step 3: Think about how you would like to continue the conversation such as agreeing, suggesting, or complimenting.

Step 4: Find the words to continue conversations like:

"If your friend says something like, 'Yuck. These chicken nuggets are gross,' you can agree by saying something like, 'Yeah. I don't like them either.'"

-Or-

"If your friend says something like, 'Last night when I was playing video game XYZ, I couldn't make it to Level 3,' you can suggest something like, 'Try to press the X button and the O button at the same time.'"

-Or-

“If your friend shows you a sketch and says something like, ‘Look what I drew in art class,’ you can give a compliment such as, ‘Wow! That’s so cool!’”

With your help, your son or daughter will feel confident to start conversations and join in and feel happy to make stronger and more friendships! ❖

Ways To Reduce School Stress For Kids With Autism

Back-to-school can mean back-to-anxiety for children with autism. The ways in which children with autism process their surroundings, or think and understand, are usually different than ours.

A lot of the time, things that happen to children with autism don't make sense to them, so they tend to develop anxieties, or fears, which lead to stress. Since these children have difficulty with self-regulation, or adjusting their reactions and feelings, a joint effort between the school staff members and you as the parent will help reduce anxieties.



Your child's anxieties might not always be so obvious because, again, we don't always process information the same way they do.

Sometimes we can use language (talking) to **identify** what the fears are that your child has. Then we can **figure out why** so that we can **explain it** in a way he or she can understand, or **change the environment** to make him or her feel more comfortable.

Take examples I have observed through the years...

One of my 8-year-old students was suddenly refusing to go to school when before she had enjoyed it.

Through talking with her, I realized that during this time, students within her grade were being tested repeatedly. She was anxious and nervous because she has been taught to always respond to the teacher's questions, and if she had trouble responding, she was encouraged to ask for help.

She asked me why teachers give students help at every other time except for tests. Good question, I thought to myself. The parents, teachers, and I thought of solutions that included some forms of "help" on tests, like answer banks (where all answers are listed randomly), a choice of only two answers, and 'open book' (where she is able to look up answers in her text book).

For the first time in my career, I realized this contradiction in our unwritten social rules of society. I understood how my student felt confused and frustrated. So, to give her the most independence, I discussed with her parents and teachers that in all fairness, if no help (or not enough help) can be given during tests, it's only logical and justifiable to write "I don't know" on the test.

A mainstreamed third grade student of mine developed a pattern of feeling sick and staying home from school every Thursday.

We figured out that physical education class took place on Thursdays. "Phys Ed" class can be overwhelming for kids with autism – the physical effort, requirements for speed, fine and gross motor coordination of body movements, sensory overload of the gym (where everything sounds louder, has bright lights, filled with kids running all around), confusion about rules of some games, and the strategies behind team sports like basketball and kickball.

I imagined myself in his shoes – I would be absent, too!

Solutions included having him remain within the mainstream for part of the week. Rather than participating in the game, he chose a job to do like passing out and collecting equipment and keeping score while cheering the teams on.

In this way he improved his functional language skills like saying, “Here’s your ball.” and “Good luck!” and “Aw, nice try”. The other part of the week, he attended a different adaptive PE class which matched his abilities in order to participate directly in the sports and activities of that class.

One of my Kindergarten students would tantrum when he entered his classroom.

Along with school being a new experience, he had encountered his first fire drill. Fire drills are unexpected, extraordinarily loud, and can be confusing and scary. As a result, my student had begun to associate school with being an unsafe place.

During the drill, this Kindergartener would be frozen with fear and screaming because of the fear of fire, a sudden disruption in his routine, the blaring sound, and the hurry to exit the building. However, we also discovered he was anxious because he couldn’t see where the fire was.



Our solution was to explain that “A fire drill usually means that everything is ok and there is usually no fire. But to keep everyone safe, we have to make believe there is a real fire somewhere - out of sight.”

We further explained that “The fire bell has to be sudden because we never know when there might be a fire somewhere in the building, and the bell has to be loud so that everyone in the school can hear it and get out safely.”

Thereafter, we made a pair of over-the-ear headphones available for him during a fire drill to block out some of the noise and calm him while a paraprofessional teacher's aide walked alongside him.

You as the parents, together with school staff members – including teachers, paraprofessional teacher's aides, occupational/physical and speech-language therapists, behaviorists, and psychologists – can help make your child's school experience safe, comfortable, educational, and enjoyable. ❖

About the author

Karen Kabaki-Sisto, M.S. CCC-SLP, has been a communication expert for over 20 years. As a certified Speech-Language Pathologist and Applied Behavior Analysis Instructor, Karen has been empowering people with autism & special needs to have more meaningful conversations like never before.

Her highly effective I CAN! For Autism Method™ - perfected for over 10 years and now incorporated within the iPad app "I Can Have Conversations With You!™" is changing lives through improved social and language skills. It is 100% fun for both kids and adults to use! Join the conversation at www.iCanForAutism.com.

